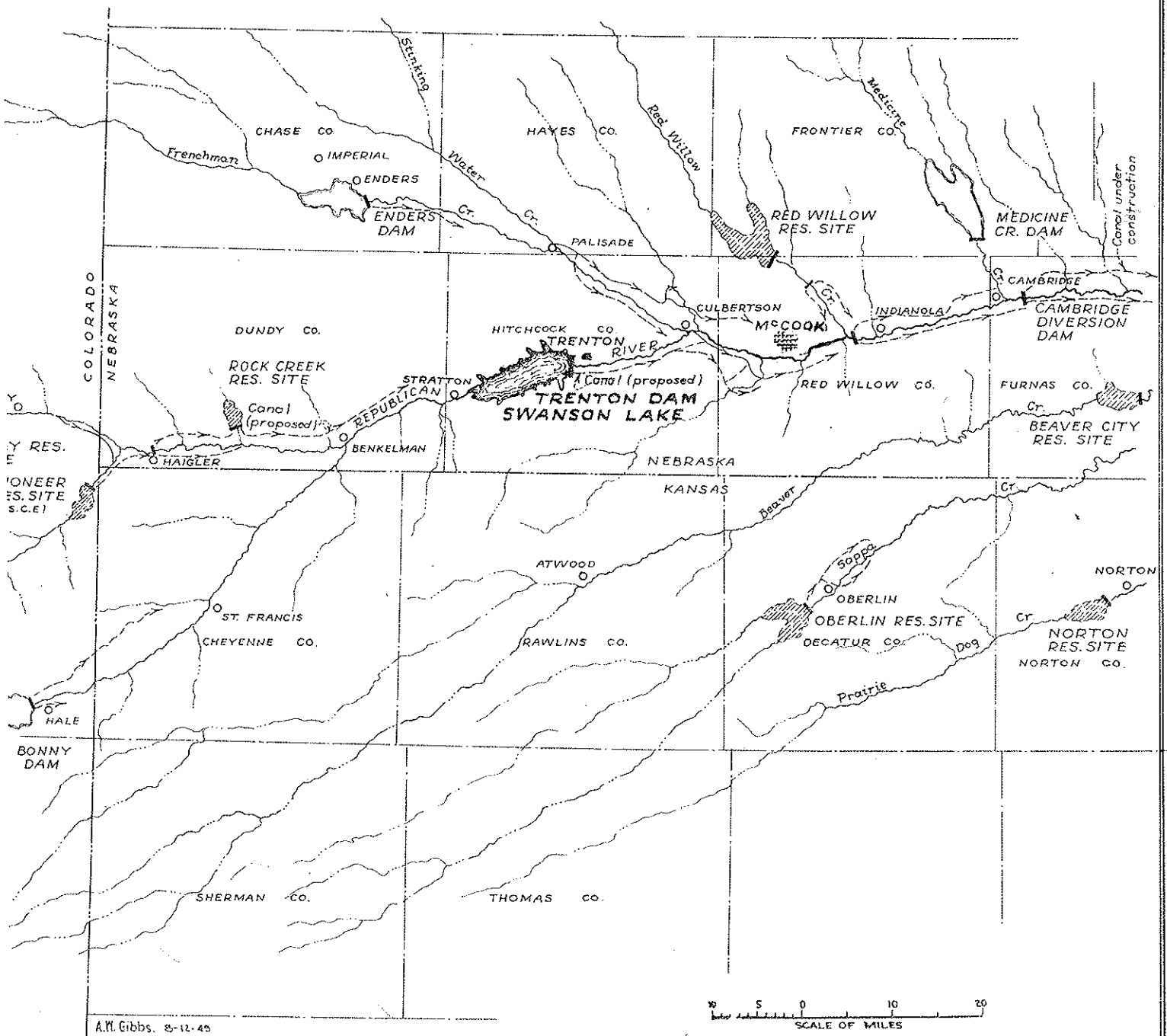


TRENTON DAM AND SWANSON LAKE ROUND BREAKING CELEBRATION



TRENTON, NEBRASKA
SEPTEMBER 21, 1949

THE REPUBLICAN VALLEY FLOOD Of 1935

AMY TAYLOR STOLTE



Main Street looking east from the Town Hall during height of 1935 flood

The disastrous flood which hit Trenton and the entire Republican Valley in the summer of 1935 was really a succession of high waters. The loss of life, the ruin of farm land and property constituted the most serious catastrophe in the history of the valley.

The heavy rains of May 28 started the rampaging Republican on its destination of destruction. On the night of May 30, traditionally a stormy date in this locality, the area received a rain of several inches. The following afternoon another downpour, especially heavy in the canyons northwest of Trenton, all of which drain into the Republican River, sent more water which threatened to deluge the town.

The river flood hit Trenton about 4:00 A. M. on Friday, May 31. A warning of the rising river was received by Burlington Agent G. P. B. Towle, about 1:00 A. M. from Benkelman. He phoned all residents in the south part of town and on the south side of the river advising them to go to higher ground. A second warning was given at 4:00 A. M.

Shortly after 7:00 A. M. the bridge south of town went out and the river had spread out from its usual quarter of a mile to three quarters of a mile in width. Houses, stock, machinery, and automobiles as well as trees and debris of all kinds could be seen floating away. By noon the back water had reached main street and the entire eastern section of town was flooded. By this time many residents were fleeing their homes and taking refuge on the hill north of town. About 2:00 P. M. that same afternoon the skies darkened to such an extent that lights were needed and another heavy rain came up from the northwest. The water rushed down from the canyons and creeks and into the west and north part of town.

The writer, as well as many other Trenton residents, spent the afternoon on the hill north of town. The swollen river with the debris and aftermath of a flood were visible from this vantage point after the darkness resulting from the afternoon storm had lifted. There were forty-seven people who took refuge in the Ammon O'Dell home. Although the home was small, the O'Dells accommodated as



Hitchcock County Courthouse and grounds inundated by 1935 flood

many as came. Other homes on the hill were similarly occupied.

The N. W. Bell Telephone office in Trenton, located just north of the Church of God, was surrounded by water, which also came up over the front porch and into the back room. Chief Operator Mrs. Ella Spangler Horvath and her assistant, Mrs. Lillie Taylor, stayed at the switchboard until the afternoon storm came up and orders came from the McCook office for them to leave their posts. They were taken from the building in a boat. The switchboard was not left without an operator, as Francis (Butch) Horvath, although an amateur, remained on duty until the water began to recede and the regular operators returned to their work.

Twelve lives were lost in the Trenton vicinity. Some bodies were never recovered and some were found several weeks later at various points down the river.

Many people took refuge in trees and some miraculous rescues were performed. Mrs. E. C. Colver was found on an island about three miles down the river on Saturday, June 1. She, her husband, and small son George had been living in their wagon house at the gravel pit, south of town. They climbed to the gravel hoist when the house started moving in the high water. A hard wind blew the hoist over flinging all of them into the water. Mrs. Colver grabbed a floating plank holding her son with one arm. Mr. Colver also took hold of the plank and they stayed together until some object hit Mr. Colver and jerked him loose. She finally lost her hold on the boy but believed he had drowned before she was forced to let go of him. The bodies of Mr. Colver and son George were recovered later.

Others who lost their lives included Mr. and Mrs. James Thomas and son Spencer, Mr. and Mrs. Owen Murtha, Mrs. Alva Stonecipher, Mildred Stonecipher, Ethel Black and Mr. and Mrs. Howard Smith.

Mr. and Mrs. James Thomas lived south of the river at the time of the flood, between the two present bridges. Their son Spencer, who lived farther south, had come to warn his parents and help them to higher ground, but all were overtaken by the quickly rising water and presumably went down stream with the house. The Murthas resided two and one half miles west of town and were evidently lost as they attempted to leave their home for a safer place. The Stonecipher family who lived between Trenton

and Stratton were rescued from their house in a boat, but the boat capsized and three lives were lost. The Smiths lived temporarily at the gravel pit.

A ferry operated across the main channel of the river after the main flood had subsided, to accommodate the farmers from that territory. A pontoon foot bridge was constructed southeast of town. This bridge went out, due to more high water on June 12, and was rebuilt four times before a temporary wagon bridge was usable. The wagon bridge was partly constructed but was taken out by another rise in the river on June 17. The rebuilding was started at a point farther west and seemingly less vulnerable from more high water.

The first mail to come into Trenton after May 30, was brought in by airplane on June 3. On June 5, the plane picked up mail to be sent from Trenton. Train service was resumed on June 24 when the first train since May 30 came through Trenton.

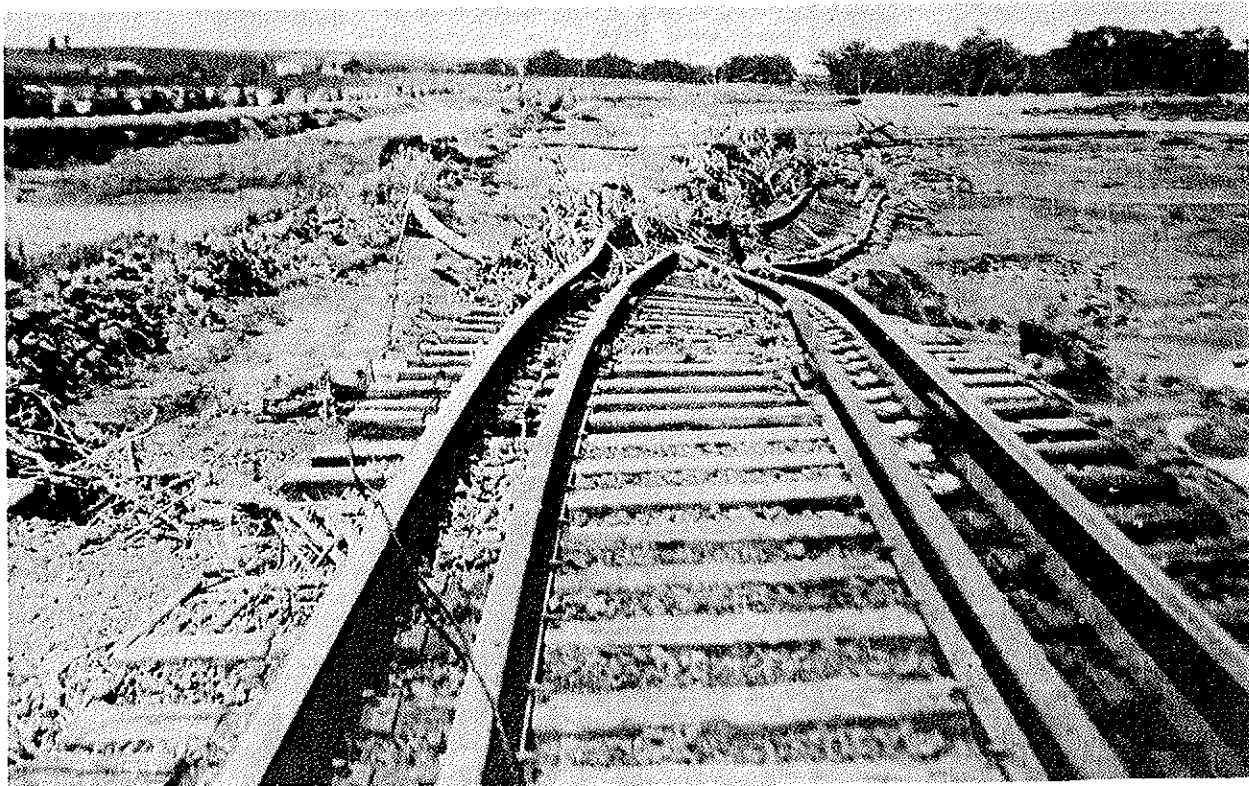
The experiences retold here are only a few of the many similar stories of heroism and destruction. The scene was reproduced in every town and community along the Republican Valley from Haigler, Nebraska to Concordia, Kansas.

The Republican River cut new channels, widening the river bed all along the valley. This necessitated the building of many new bridges and of two bridges south of Trenton.

It is a source of pleasure to residents of the valley to anticipate the construction of the Trenton Dam, which will forego the possibilities of a recurrence of the disastrous flood of 1935.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Four generations of the writer, Amy Stolte's family, have been residents of the Republican Valley. The late A. L. Taylor homesteaded in Hitchcock County in 1886. He later moved to Trenton and in 1897 bought the Republican Leader, which he published until his death in 1932. All of his children, reared in Trenton, are still living. Besides Mrs. Stolte, a son, Wayne and family, reside here. A. L. Taylor's mother, Polly E. Marble, came to Trenton in 1911 and spent the rest of her life here. Billy and Polly Stolte constitute this family's contribution to the fourth generation of the Taylor family in the Republican Valley. The old Taylor home, still in family, is occupied by Judge W. L. Mote.*

16th Sunday



The power and damage of uncontrolled floods are evidenced by these twisted rails

Historical Reminiscences of Culbertson and Hitchcock County

AS GATHERED BY JOE G. CREWS

This history and record of experiences is compiled because Culbertson is the pioneer town and the pioneer in irrigation in Hitchcock County and Hitchcock County is the pioneer in flood control.

The County of Hitchcock was first settled by a group who came west to establish homes and located on the Blackwood and Frenchman creeks, because of the abundance of game and fish for food and timber that could be used to build their dugouts and log houses.

The present town site was established because it was the intersection of the Texas to Ogallala horse trail and the main travel of the pioneers wagon trains from the east.

The first families to locate at Culbertson were Captain John Kleven, Galen E. Baldwin, Chas. Gesslemen, George Gesslemen, John Miller, John Murphy, Lafe Tarkington, Sam Tate, Hans Hogan and A. Larson, in February, 1873.

In August of 1873, W. Z. Taylor came here to organize Hitchcock County and the Governor appointed Galen Baldwin as sheriff to post notices of an election to be held. The officers elected were Galen Baldwin, sheriff; Lew Carr, County Judge; W. Z. Taylor, County Clerk; Lem Carrington, County Surveyor, and John Kleven, W. W. Kelly and George Gesslemen, Commissioners.

The first white man to die and be buried in Hitchcock County was a man by the name of "Bess." He was bitten by a skunk and went to the Kleven home to get help. One of the men went to Arapahoe to get the nearest doctor, but before the doctor could get to him, he had died a horrible death from hydrophobia. He was buried on what is known as the Crews Hill, west of Culbertson. Soon after this two horse thieves were caught by the Doyle brothers and were either killed in a gun battle or hanged, west of where the town of Palisade now stands and they were brought to Culbertson and buried near the grave of Mr. Bess. At that time the people of Hitchcock County took care of the law as they thought it should be taken care of, they also believed in keeping their word as the following incident will show: Charles Dill ran a drug store and sold intoxicating liquors. Some of the cowboys got a little too much to drink and during the height of their hilarity, shot a few rounds into Dill's store. The two he suspected were Little Sam Esman and Long Tom Hill and he sent them a word if they ever stepped into his place, he would kill them. About a year later, Little Sam came back from Texas with a horse drive and went to Dill's store. Dill drew a gun and killed him before he could say a word.

The first white boy to be born in Hitchcock County was Henry Kleven, the son of John and Bertha Kleven. Henry is the true pioneer of the county and still lives in Culbertson, where he was born in 1876.

The first Doctor in the County was Doctor Vastine, father of Bruce Vastine, former County Clerk. The Methodist Episcopal Church was organized by my Mother, Mrs. C. G. Crews, and her sister, Mrs. Belle Van Buskirk, who got Reverend Allan Bartley to come here from Arapahoe in February 1882 to help them in the organization.

The first newspaper was established by W. Z. Taylor in 1879 and was published by Nate L. Baker. In the year 1891 the first irrigation project here was started and built by Buffalo Jones. It is now known as the Frenchman Irrigation Company and owned by the farmers who own land that it irrigates. It irrigates about ten thousand acres from Palisade to the county line east of Culbertson. After this, there were a number of irrigation projects started on the Frenchman and Republican rivers.

From then on the County rapidly went forward and the population of the four towns in the county probably doubled in the next ten years.

Then came the floods of 1915 that destroyed crops and farms. I remember in the spring of 1915, when the Frenchman was on a rampage, of driving a team of mules to a farm that my Father owned northwest of Culbertson and at the intersection of what is now 17 and 6 highways the team had to swim for some distance to get around the turn in the road. After the floods came the drouth years of the late twenties and the early thirties, when many of the farmers had to give up their precious homes and seek jobs or move to more prosperous communities to make their living.

In the early twenties, a group of far-seeing citizens saw the need of irrigation and the waste of water in flood time, so a meeting was called in Culbertson to form an association of towns for the purpose of trying to get something done that would remedy the situation. At that meeting were Carl Swanson, J. F. Ratcliff, Judge Victor Westermarck, C. B. Kugler, Jake Bauer, Adolph Thuman, G. G. Eisenhart, Nick Foster and others that I do not recall. They formed the Twin Valleys Association of Community Clubs and included towns from Culbertson west to the state line. They started to investigate the possibilities of dams on the Frenchman and Republican rivers, hired engineers, drew maps and selected possible dam sites. As the possibilities grew, so did the organization and finally the Republican Valley Association was formed, which included towns as far as Republican City.

Then came the destructive flood of 1935, with the damage running into millions of dollars, homeless running into thousands and with more than a hundred unsuspecting people losing their lives. I had one experience during this flood that I suppose I will carry to my dying day—that of standing on the bluffs of the Frenchman river and helplessly watching the Wallace home, with the entire family of six, clinging to the roof, slowly start to float away. Then, being caught by the current, it rushed down to where the swirling waters of the Blackwood emptied into the Republican, causing a great whirlpool, and there the house and its occupants disappeared forever.

It seems that progress has been slow, but now the pioneer spirit of Hitchcock County is bearing fruit, as we see the dams being built and the canals constructed that will take care of the suffering caused by drouth and flood.

Now, I would like to finish with a little poem that my Mother read at a Historical Society meeting a number of years ago, which I think will express the sentiment of all the pioneers that have stayed in Hitchcock County.

I love to live in a town like this—
Just a little old town like this;
Where the sunflowers bloom along the way
And the birds sing songs the live-long day,
And the glorious sun, with a genial kiss,
Makes it good to live in a town like this.

I love to live in a town like this—
Just a little old town like this;
Where every anguish in one's breast
Is felt and shared by friends the best,
Who shade the gail and shade the bliss,
In a little old town like this.

I love to live in a town like this—
Just a little old town like this;
Where neighbors watch by the loved ones' bed

And weep with you o'er the bier of the dead,
And forgive every deed that was done amiss—

Then let me live in a town like this—
Just a little old town like this;
Where your foe of today is your friend of tomorrow,
Who is eager to bear the cross of your sorrow,
And make it as light as the morning mist,
In a little old town like this.

Yes, let me die in a town like this—
Just a little old town like this;
And o'er my grave let the roses creep
To brighten the spot where my poor bones sleep,
When my soul has winged the deep abyss,
And rest on forever—in a town like this.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The writer of this article, Joe G. Crews, son of the late Mr. and Mrs. C. G. Crews, who came to Hitchcock county in 1881, was born in the village of Culbertson on February 22, 1891. He has always been a resident of that community, being a farm operator for many years, serving as Culbertson postmaster for nine years and at the present time being engaged in the lumber and farm implement business. He is now a member of the board of directors of the Republican Valley Conservation Association.



1935 Benkelman Flood

AS I RECALL THE FLOOD OF '35

C. L. KETLER

On June 1, 1935, I was awakened from a sound sleep at my home located on a rather high bench in Benkelman, which provided an excellent view of the Republican river valley, both as it applied to the North and South Forks before they converge about a mile east of Benkelman. I say I was abruptly awakened but it was more than that because the terrible roaring of descending flood waters all but terrified me, as it did hundreds of others. I could hardly believe my eyes for I had lived in Benkelman for more than a half century and thought I knew the possibilities of the Republican River, but how little I knew whereof I spoke. The ever-swelling waves extending two and one-half miles from the railroad tracks west at Benkelman to Big Timber Valley two and one-half miles south, carried with it houses, farm implements, horses, cattle—in fact, almost everything imaginable. Big cottonwood trees dotting the valley which had been here as long as I could remember gave way and went down in the flood waters like weeds. All during the gruesome day, folks stood on the hillsides and watched the work of devastation go on, wondering who and how many had already lost their lives; wondering if the people down stream knew of the approach of this great and growing danger to their lives. But there was nothing that they could do but to wonder. When the death list in Dundy county alone was finally tabulated the toll had reached 19 persons. The beautiful grassy valleys of the Republican valley were turned into ugly sandbars and each gust of wind caused the sand to fill the air equal to any desert sand storm. I don't need to tell you people of the Republican valley what that great flood disaster meant to all of us—you know all about it, too.

Nor do I need to tell you of the disaster that flood waters brought to Indianola, Trenton and Cambridge later. You know all about that too. And I don't need to tell you how happy every man, woman and

child in this great Republican Valley is today in the hope that when our government completes these great reclamation projects that our flood menace will be gone forever and in its place will come life-giving irrigation and irrigated crops to our splendid communities.

Like all the rest of you, I took heart twenty years ago, in the hopes that irrigation would sooner or later be forthcoming. But after that great flood disaster of 1935, when our beautiful valley was transformed to a mighty series of sandbars, it looked as if our need for irrigation had gone too—that the great flood had put our irrigation fires out forever. And so it is that, like hundreds of others, who have visited the various dam projects over the section which are nearing completion such as the Enders and Medicine Creek dams, and those such as Bonny Dam, west of St. Francis, Kansas on the south fork, and our own Trenton Dam, the construction of which is now nicely started, it seems to me still that it is all a dream—a long hoped for something that could never come to pass. But now it is on the march and how fitting indeed, that these celebrations should be carried through with an enthusiasm that challenges comparison for, indeed, the great Republican Valley has much to be thankful for in this year of our Lord, 1949. And it is befitting, too, that we should thus show our great appreciation to our government and those who will assume and have assumed responsibility in making it a reality and who will not fail us.

The benefits that will eventually come to our valley and to our people through their efforts thruout the years ahead are almost beyond comprehension.

Editor's Note: Mr. Ketler is a veteran newspaper editor in this part of the state, having published the Benkelman Post for a great many years. He is still very active in his office and in community affairs.